

Halo2: RewriteNovel

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Summary: A Story I've been writing It aims to novelise and make some alterations to Halo 2's stroy line

Halo2: RewriteNovel

Notes: This was going to be a re-write/novel of halo2, but i've gotten bored with it; i will now be working only on original fanfics.

Chapter 1

Another day at the office

"There was viscosity throughout the gel layer and the plating was about to fail.

'The optics are totally fried.'

'And let's not even talk about the power supply.'

'Do you have any idea how much all this gear costs son?'

Spartan 117; The Master Chief; the last surviving SPARTAN II super soldier and arguably humanity's greatest soldier ever listened politely as Master Gunnery Sargent Guns lectured him on his new armour and fighting in it. Sighing he fitted his new helmet and over the hiss of compressed air came his reply; "Try telling that to the Covenant."

Inside his helmet The Master Chief felt the cool rush off air upon his body as the suits environmental system powered up. The suit was a tight fit, too tight in fact; it would take some time for the internal gel layer to conform to the Chief's body in an ideal fit. Until then he wouldn't be able to move as fast and would tire out faster. The Chief decided that he'd have to get in some more suit time until the gel was properly formed.

"Well, I guess it was all obsolete anyway," replied Guns. 'The new armour just came up from Song Nam this morning.

"Stand by Chief; I'm going to offline the inhibitors."

Overhead the Chief heard the whir of an electric motor as the inhibitor retracted into a recess within the ceiling. The augmented vision systems of the new MJOLNIR MK VI activated and once more the Chief became aware of the room around him. Within the armoury of the Super Magnetic Accelerator Cannon, The Cairo stood the Master Chief.

The armoury of The Cairo's armoury was a typical grey metal room, the kind common to all UNSC spacecraft. It was bland and boring, but it was functional. But this particular room was special, despite the standard architecture, for, in addition to two large widows looking out into space around the sides was arrayed a potent array of lovingly maintained standard issue UNSC death. BR-55's, M7's, MA5B's, M247's and even a few SPNKr's all sat, for now at least locked away within their racks where they could do no harm. How long they would remain that way neither the Chief nor Master Gunnery Sargent Guns could tell, though both were sure it would be shorter than they wanted.

In front of the Chief Guns was tapping away at a small chatter console. "Diagnostics show targeting is five-by-five, shields are at 100 and the gel layer is at optimum viscosity. Ok try her out."

Carefully The Chief moved began to move his limbs, slowly at first, but gradually getting faster. According to the specs the Mk VI was nearly 12 more responsive than the Mk V and it would be easy to over correct at first.

Guns began to speak once more; 'You'll want to fire a few thousand rounds on the range, try an get a feel for her, until then, take it easy and take it slow.'

The Chief knew that Guns was right, if he went too hard too fast he risked injuring himself and he couldn't risk that; the Covenant might arrive at any moment. Whilst he listened to Guns the Chief brought up his schedule on his HUD. Thanks to ONI propaganda The Chief had unwittingly become something of a celebrity, especially after word of his 'Single Handed Slaughtering of Legions of the Covenants Best Troops' at Reach had gotten out. That brought a slight smile to the Chief's face; 'If only I was as good as ONI made me out to be, then the Covenant would be in trouble.' As a consequence the Chief had been forced to spend a considerable amount of time attending interviews and giving speeches; unfortunately at the expense of precious training time.

The Chief was pulled out this train of thought by Gun's lecturing voice. 'Are you listening to me? Pay attention. The new Mk VI doesn't have as much armour as the old model but the shields are a lot more powerful.'

Walking over to a weapons rack Guns reached down his shirt and extracted the key card hanging around his neck that would unlock the weapons rack. He inserted the card into a small reader before turning

it through 90°. A small light above the rack began to flash as it unlocked and the locking bar rose to give access.

Guns reached into the rack and removed a single M6C pistol from its resting place, before taking a magazine pack, containing three pistol magazines from a draw beneath. Guns began to turn, yanking on the magazine pack's plastic exterior and tearing it at the perforated edge, to reveal three magazines. Extracting one he slammed it into the base of the pistol before cocking the slide and filling the armoury with its sharp metallic click as the first cartridge was driven into the weapons chamber.

As he placed the remaining 2 magazines onto a table he called out to nobody in particular; 'Live weapon, observe all safety protocols!'

Carefully Guns took up the pistol in both hands and flicked off the safety. His eyes acquired the sights as he took aim at the Chief's torso and tightened his grip on the trigger.

'FIRE IN THE HOLE!'

Guns pulled down firmly on the trigger of the M6C, driving back the weapons hammer before slamming it down onto the primer of one of the pistol's massive 12.7x40mm rounds. As the hammer impacted the percussion created a small spark which caught on the rounds propellant, igniting it in an instant. The propellant reacted, creating immense pressures within the chamber of the gun. The bullet it began to accelerate, faster and faster towards the end of the barrel, driven forth by the immense pressure of the gases behind it.

An echoing boom resonated throughout the armoury as the 12.7mmx40mm High Explosive-Semi Armour Piercing round sprung forth from the gun at slightly under mach 1, slamming into the Chief's shields before being vaporised by them in a flash of energy.

Guns quickly lowered the pistol and flicked the safety back on before ejecting the magazine and clearing the chamber. 'Weapons are safed!'

The Chief looked at his shield indicator, the pistol round had barely dented them and they were already recharging.

'As you can see the shields recharge a lot faster, they're a lot better than the Covenant tech we used on the Mk V, but remember they are NOT invincible'

With that that sobering though the Master Chief continued listening to the Gunnery Sargent as he went through the diagnostic process for the new suit.

Chapter 2

For one member of the Covenant the past six months had been one sobering thought after the next. Drunk on the continuing extermination of the humans and the promise of The Great Journey he had destroyed world after world, killed thousands of sentient beings. But that drunken ecstasy had been brought to a crunching halt by the actions of one human, the demon, the Spartan, the Master Chief.

Whatever you called him it was clear that it was he was the one responsible for the destruction of the Sacred Ring, the annihilation of four ships, the slaughtering of an entire legion and though he could not be sure he suspected the release of The Flood. But one thing he was sure of was that because of The Demon his life had been shattered into so many pieces, as the Sacred Ring had also been shattered.

That member of the Covenant was a Golden clad Sangheili commander. The Commander of the Fleet of Particular Justice as it would be, the very fleet that had been devastated by the Master Chief at Installation 04. And because of his failure to defend the installation, against a measly few humans he had been deemed a Heretic by all, cast from the warm embrace of the Covenant and barred from his place within the Great Journey. He had been thrown into the jails, kicked and beaten and tortured by the savage Jiralhanae, locked in solitary confinement for weeks at a time and been shamed for all.

But for now at least the Commander was out of Jail for he now stood within the mighty walls of the Great Council Chamber, aboard the Covenant Holy-City High Charity. But although he was free from the jail he now faced even worse; trial by the Council, and he knew they wanted his blood. The stands of the Council Chamber were packed with the Councillors of the Sangheili and the Prophets, and at the front of the room sat the three highest and most revered members of all the Covenant; The Most High and Revered Prophets of Truth, Mercy and Regret.

The Elite Commander began to talk; 'There was only one ship.'

The Prophet of Truth was the first to reply, in his softly spoken voice; 'One? Are you sure?'

'Yes. They called it The Pillar of Autumn.'

The Prophet of Regret, who was present at the trial only by hologram angrily banged his delicate fist upon his ornately detailed anti-gravity Throne and his harsh, sermonising voice echoed throughout the chamber. 'Why was it not destroyed with the rest of their fleet?'

'It fled, as we set fire to their planet. But I followed with all the ships at my command.'

Truth leant forward in his hover Throne, stroking his chin before continuing; 'When you first saw Halo, were you blinded by its majesty?

'Blinded?'

Regret spoke up again; 'Paralysed? Dumbstruck?'

'No'

This time it was The Prophet of Mercy who spoke up; 'And yet the Humans were able to evade your ships, destroying 4 in the process before landing on the Sacred Ring and desecrating it with their filthy footsteps.'

'Noble Hierarchs, surely you understand that I was unable to use our Plasma Torpedoes to destroy the ship outright and that once the Parasite attackedâ€¢!'

With that revelation the Chamber became filled with the outraged cries of the Councillors, all calling for the Commanders death.

Angrily the Prophet of Mercy spoke up once more, demanding silence and order within the Council. The Councillors could not be seen to disobey a hierarch and as such they quickly quitted down.

With order once more restored Truth continued; 'You were right to focus your attention on the Flood, but this Demon, this 'Master Chief?'

'By the time I learned of the Demon's intent it was too late. The fusion drives of the Human vessel had already been catastrophically...'

Shouts once more filled the chamber, despite the chidings of Mercy. This time they were louder, more bloodthirsty. Holopens and other lose debris was hurled at the commander from the stands. Whilst it bounced harmlessly off his shields the gesture was obvious; We Hate You.

To the side of the Chamber stood Tartarus; Chieftain of the Brutes and he chuckled to himself at the predicament of this incompetent Elite. He allowed a smile to spread across his face as he savoured the moment. 'Not long now, not long at all,' he thought to himself.

As the Prophet of Mercy continued yelling for order in the Council the Prophet of Regret moved his Anti-gravity throne over towards Truth's and whispered into his ear; 'Noble Prophet of Truth, this has gone on long enough. Make an example of this bungler, the council demands it.'

Gradually the Council quitted down once more and Truth resumed talking; 'You are one of our most cherished instruments. Long have you led your fleet with honour and distinction. But your inability to safeguard Halo...was a colossal failure.'

In the stands of the Chamber a Prophet Councillor stood up and his shout filled the chamber; 'Nay, It was Heresy.'

For a third time the Chamber became filled with angry shouts. The Prophet of Mercy was now visibly enraged, but he let it pass this time; the Council was now whipped up into a frenzy and beyond his control. Instead of yelling he would just have to let it dampen out on its own. Several minutes later the torrent of insults and curses had finally died down enough for the trial to continue.

The Commander was the first to speak up, making one last attempt to clear his name, one that he knew to be futile before he had even begun. 'I will continue my campaign against the humans,' came his defiant words.

And with that the outcry of the Councillors began once more. Louder and more frenzied than it had ever been before. And when a Kig-Yar

cleric was hurled down at the Commander from the Sangheili stands Truth knew it was time to end this, else they have a riot on their hands.

Angrily now he rebuked the commander; 'No! You will not.'

A pair of Jiralhanae moved in to take the Sangheili arms, ready to drag him off, but before they could the Commander stood up straight and pushed them away; he would go honourably, not as the prisoner of some Jiralhanae. For a tense moment the Jiralhanae stood their ground before backing off. The Commander turned and began to leave the Chamber, his held high and with the 2 Jiralhanae in close escort.

For the last time the Prophet of Truth spoke up; 'Soon the Great Journey Shall begin. But when it does the weight of your heresy will stay your feet and you will be left behind.'

And with those closing words the Elite Commander left the chamber and headed back to the Jails, his heart in pieces.

Chapter 3

Old Pals

After nearly an hour Master Gunnery Sargent Guns's lecture at last began to draw to a close. 'Well, I guess that about covers it, remember, take things slow out there, you don't want to break something.'

Gun's next sentence was drowned out by the hiss of an elevator door on the armouries side opening to reveal a Marine in full dress uniform. The Chief's HUD informed him the Marine was one Avery Johnson Sgt. UNSC/UESG. It was hardly necessary though; he could have recognised Johnson easily; he had after all been one of the only other survivors from installation 04.

Johnson stepped forward from the elevator and into the armoury. 'So how's my boy Guns? I don't see any training wheels on that tin can.'

That annoyed Guns; Johnson obviously didn't understand the difficulty of maintaining a system as complex as the MJOLNIR armour. Curtly Guns told Johnson to 'shut your chilly hole because his armours working fine.'

Johnson knew he'd better not piss off the Gunny, especially if he wanted those mods to his armour so he decided it was best to make his leave. 'C'mon then Chief, their ready for us on the bridge.'

The Master Chief looked over to Guns who nodded that everything was fine and with that he stepped into the elevator with Johnson.

Before the doors closed Guns had one last thing to say; 'Don't forget, if your shields go down find some cover wait for them to recharge.'

Johnson however was unable to let that particular opportunity to promote himself pass by and his response quickly followed; 'That, or you can hide behind me.'

The elevator doors began to close and the Chief heard a muffled but obvious 'Yeah right' coming from Guns as the elevator began its ascent.'

'Well he's in a particularly fine mood toady,' Johnson remarked to nobody in particular. 'Perhaps Lord Hood didn't give him an invitation.'

After a short trip the elevator slowed to a halt at one of many tram stops fro The Cairo's internal tramway. Johnson, who had been smoking a cigar, threw the stump into a bin and shortly thereafter a tram; empty, rolled up and the doors snapped open. They stepped in and electric motors hummed as the tram began to accelerate. A bulkhead ahead opened and the tram passed through into one of The Cairo's conservatoriums, whose walls and ceilings were an ultra-transparent plastic. Johnson gazed through the trams windows and out into space. All around the sky was filled with UNSC frigates and destroyers locked in the strangely satisfying dance of orbital mechanics. Other S-MAC stations floated majestically and Longsword interceptors darted about. But all these things were dwarfed in both bulk and luminance by the Earth. Hanging immobile it flooded the sky with its blue-green iridescence. It was the true beauty of the sky.

In a voice that seemed strangely subdued Johnson began to talk; 'Earth. Haven't seen her in years. Now, when I finally do get back I wonder how much longer she'll be here.' Johnson passed for a long moment, sighing. He'd grown up on Earth, and he'd sacrificed his youth and his innocence to defend her, seen friend after friend die, all at the hands of the Covenant. But now he wondered if it might all have been in vain; despite the Chief, despite the fleet, despite the Marines, despite himself surely they would not be able to hold back the Covenant hammer fall that was sure to come. 'No!' he told himself. 'If we think like that then the Covenant will win. Earth, Humanity, 5000 years of civilization will have been for nothing.' 'Well,' Johnson knew that he would NOT let that happen.

With that thought the uncertainty vanished from both his voice and his mind and he continued his speech once more.

'When I first shipped out for basic the orbital defence grid was all theory, politics. Now look at it; The Cairo is one of over 300 geosynchronous platforms around the Earth.'

Johnson walked to the other side of the tram car and began looking out once more, this time at The Cairo itself, stretching over 500 metres into the sky.

'That S-MAC gun out there can put a round clean through a Covenant capitol ship. With co-ordinated fire from the other stations and the fleet nothing's getting past in one piece.'

The Master Chief however did not share Johnson's optimism. He was also looking out the tram car, but not into space. Instead he was looking into the training area for the Marine forces assigned to guard the station. The Marines on The Cairo however were primarily the part-time reservists of the UNSCDF however rather than the less numerous Marine Corps. Though they weren't as skilled as the full-time Marine Corps they were still a decent force, and to one

side he could see a group firing their rifles at some targets with not half-bad accuracy. 'Maybeâ€œ' thought the Chief 'â€œJust maybe, they won't do to badly when the Covenant arrive.' Not all the Marines were training though, many were off duty and stood around chatting with friends or browsing the Chatter, some even waved when they saw the Chief; waves which he sheepishly returned. John wondered how many of them would be alive when the battle for Earth was over and that thought that scared him; not with fear for himself, he had risked his life to much for that, but instead for those Marines out there. All of them would have had families, hopes, dreams and ambitions and not one was a day over 25.

Long moments of silence past as the tram car continued its journey, but finally it pulled to a halt outside of the bridge. Outside the car a crowd of Marines awaited the Chief, cheering profusely and several TV cameras hovered about on their ducted fans.

'You said there wasn't going to be any cameras.'

'And you said you was going to wear something nice,' Johnson replied as he gestured at the Chiefs armour. 'People need hero's Chief, to give them hope, and right now you're the closest thing to a hero we got.'

With that thought the doors opened and the Master Chief and Johnson stepped forth into the waiting crowd.

Chapter4

That's got to hurt.

The Elite Commander stepped into the grav-lift. Since the trial he had spent the last week rotting in The Hall of Heresy a jail within the deepest depths of High Charity. It was reserved for those who had committed the most heinous crimes against the Covenant and the Forerunner. Heretics, infidels, Enemies of the Forerunner, whatever name you gave them they were all despised. And now the Elite Commander was one of them.

The grav-lift activated and he began to soar up through the diffuse purple bowels of High Charity. Higher and higher, faster and faster, up and up, purple inscriptions rushed past at phenomenal speeds. A moment later the grav-lift burst out into the light, and rushed across the gargantuan central chamber of High Charity. The conduit weaved chaotically about, dodging other conduits packed with streams of Covenant. Looking to the left he noticed a mighty Lekgolo pair hurtling unmajestically through the sky. That brought a smile to the Commanders face; as it had done since his child hood; some creatures just weren't meant for flight.

Presently he began to slow as he approached the gargantuan tower that formed the Prophets High Sanctum. The grav-conduit within which he rode in turned abruptly and rose up and through the base of the Prophets mighty address platform. A moment later the Elite Commander stepped from the grav-lift and on to the platform, followed closely by two Jiralhanae who had escorted him there.

Suddenly the cheers of one-hundred thousand Covenant filled the air and a mighty, though slightly high pitched chant of 'Her-it-tic. Her-it-tic. Her-it-tic,' rose up.

The Jiralhanae Chieftain; Tartarus was their once more, smiling. With his usual smug tone he began to speak to the Commander; 'You've drawn quite a crowd.'

'If they came to hear me beg they will be disappointed.'

An evil chuckle reverberated from within Tartarus' massive chest cavity. 'Are you sure?'

In reply the Commander began to walk forwards, towards the ledge of the platform, where he would accept his punishment.

Tartarus walked up to the edge as well. As much as he would enjoy this he had his duty to do first. He cleared his throat, took a deep breath and began to talk in his deep, bellowing, booming voice.

'My Brothers of the Covenant. There can be no greater heresy than the crimes of this Sangheili. He shall pay for his crimes against The Prophets, against The Forerunner and against The Covenant. There is no excuse for his heresy.'

With that the cheering intensified 100 fold as Tartarus' electronically enhanced voice spread throughout High Charity, the Covenant homeworlds and thousands of other ships and settlements.

Tartarus barked a command to two of his Brutes, one of whom activated a holopanel causing to hovering purple rings to appear next to the Commander; one on each side. The other Jiralhanae took the Commander's arm and passed it through a ring. An instant later an invisible force field closed off the ring trapping his arm. The Jiralhanae repeated this on the other side and the Commander was now trapped. Had he tried to pull the rings down he would have found that they were impossible to move by more than a few millimetres and could easily support his weight.

Tartarus' booming voice spoke once more to the teeming Covenant ranks; 'Let the punishment of this Heretic begin!'

Moments later the rings began to glow, with yellow and orange energy arcing about them, and a dangerous humming noise emanated from deep within them. The humming and the glowing intensified, till the hum was ear-piercing and the glow blinding. Louder and louder, brighter and brighter.

Suddenly the energy began to arc through the Commander's body, frying nerves, burning flesh. Sharp needles of pain penetrated his mind, resisting his attempts to fight them, overwhelming him as they crept down the byways of his mind. He could smell his flesh burning, and the stench threatened to overwhelm him. The water in his body began to heat and expand, rupturing the cell membranes of his body, spewing cytoplasm forth. He knew that he would soon be dead if this assault on his body did not stop.

'Ten more units till I die' he thought.

Nineâ€|Eightâ€|Sevenâ€|Sixâ€|Fiveâ€|Fourâ€|Threeâ€|Twoâ€|Oneâ€|

At last the incredible torrent of energy stopped, and the humming died off. The Commander's body was released from the clutches of death. Breathing a sigh of relief he was rewarded not with cool fresh oxygen, but instead with excruciating agony. He tried to move, and every movement, every heartbeat and every breath filled him with agony. A shallow moan escaped from his jaw, filling him with shame the shame of being unable to hide the pain.

That bought a suppressed chuckle from Tartarus. 'Puny Sangheili, that dose would barely harm one of my Jiralhanae.' Though Tartarus knew that wasn't quite true the thought amused him anyway as he barked another order to his two Jiralhanae assistants.

The two assistants stepped forward and began to remove the Commanders armour. What had once been shimmering gold was now inky black. As the Jiralhanae threw the armour to the ground ash cracked off of it coating the purple floor in a fine black dust.

Upon seeing that the Jiralhanae Bracktanus felt a twinge of pity towards the disgraced Sangheili. He knew of the incredible thermal resistance that the Sangheili armour possessed and he knew that it would have taken a huge amount of energy to scorch it in such a way. It would have been very, very painful.

But it wasn't over for the Commander yet, it had only just begun.

Tartarus turned towards the crowd once more and began to bellow. 'The heretic has brought shame to the Covenant, now shame will be bought to him, for ALL to see.'

Once more the thunderous cries of 100,000 Covenant bellowed through High Charity's atmosphere.

Tartarus walked over to a small iris in the floor. He stomped his foot and the iris slid open with a hiss, flooding soft white light out. Hydraulics whirred and from the hole began to raise a long metal pole, ornately detailed, with decorative handles. And at one end the pole glowed with an evil red of a brand. That brand was in the shape of the Covenant Mark of Shame.

The Sangheili Commander watched as Tartarus lifted the Brand. He knew, from experience, that the brand was very heavy and the ease at which the Brute wielded it surprised the Commander.

Tartarus hoisted the Brand to his hip and paused to savour the moment; he was going to enjoy this, enjoy it a lot. The Chieftain tapped his finger on the brand; it was hot, easily over 500K, perfect for burning the flesh of these pitiful Sangheili. With one swift motion he swung the Brand back and thrust it forward into the Commanders chest.

For the Commander, nerves already in tatters from the electrocution it proved too much. He let out a long bellowed cry before finally blacking out into sweet oblivion.

Chapter 4

Unwanted Praise

The Master Chief stepped out from the tram car and onto the platform. Within moments the surging mass of humanity engulfed the Master Chief. Marines patted him on the back and his hand was pumped crazily up and down. Others thrust forth paper for the Chief to sign and a few of the female personnel thrust forth pairs of other things, bringing forth immense smiles on the faces of Johnson and the other Marines.

But one person was not smiling, and that person was the Chief. Had he not been wearing his armour people would have been able to see that The Master Chief, the man who had personally killed thousands of blood thirsty Covenant, faced down the gruesome Flood and turned The Monitors mechanical monsters into scrap metal was blushing from the cheers of a few marines.

A few minutes later the Chief had had all the praise he could handle and he began to nudge his way carefully towards the bridge airlock. He had to be careful; the new armour still wasn't broken in and he didn't want to accidentally injure anyone. The memory of the 3 Marines he had accidentally killed on his first day back after the surgery still haunted him. He had been created to protect Marines, not kill them.

Finally the Chief reached the bridge airlock doors and stepped in. As the doors began to close Johnson had one last thing to say to 'his' Marines; 'Don't worry folks; we'll be here all day.'

As they waited for the airlock to cycle the Chief thought about what Johnson had said earlier, about folks needing heroes. After seeing the Marines and how his presence had bought smiles and laughter he thought that maybe, just maybe Johnson was right.

But the Chief's day wasn't over yet, it had barely begun.

Finally the airlock finished its cycle and the inner doors hissed open. The chief and Johnson stepped forward onto the bridge of the UNSCDF S-MAC Platform The Cairo.

Out of nowhere a bellowing voice pierced the air and filled the bridge with its sound.

'ATT-EN-TION!'

'PRE-SENT ARMS!'

'SIR! YES! SIR!'

On either side of the Chief and Johnson 12 chrome and gold plated, bayonet equipped BR-55's, and the Marine in full dress uniform behind them snapped to attention, forming a tunnel of steel, chrome and gold plated death. After a brief pause the Chief and Johnson confidently strode forward through the tunnel formed by the ranks of the Marine Honour Guard. As they went the ultra-sharp blades of the mono-molecular edged bayonets snapped down with geometrical precision, scant few inches behind the Chief's and Johnson's backs.

As the Chief and Johnson reached the end of the tunnel the Gunnery Sargent in charge of the honour guard stepped forward and snapped off a crisp salute to the Master Chief and Sargent Avery Johnson, both of

whom promptly returned it.

Once more the Gunnery Sergeants voice bellowed throughout the Bridge; 'AT EASE MEN!' With that completed the Gunnery Sargent stepped back and resumed his place at the head of the Honour Guard ranks allowing the two heroes's to continue.

The Master Chief and Johnson continued heading towards the front of the bridge. It wasn't so much a bridge as a Combat Information Centre but such trivialities hardly mattered, the point was that the S-MAC platform_ The Cairo_ was controlled from within. One thing that made the bridge of _The Cairo_ special was that instead of walls made of Titanium-A the walls and ceiling were made entirely from an ultra-transparent polymer. Whilst admittedly they were far weaker than Titanium-armour plating they offered a brilliant view of space and the UNSC Fleet, and they flooded the room with the diffuse glow of starlight on one side and the blue iridescence of Earth on the other. The sides of the room were occupied by large computer stations behind which stood dress uniformed officers and at the front of the bridge a huge transparent screen occupied the wall. Had The Master Chief aver been to the Museum of Human Space Exploration on the famous cape he would have noted the similarities to the control rooms which had guided man on his first tentative steps into the stars nearly 500 years ago. And whilst the S-MAC stations mightn't guide any men to the stars they would soon be guiding their 10 tons slugs of death towards the stars.

The Master Chief looked to the front of the bridge where Lord Hood, commander of the S-MAC platforms stood. He wasn't alone though; standing next to him was someone else, a woman, though the Chief didn't recognise her. Curious as to whom she might be he zoomed in his helmet optics whilst his suits IFF system interrogated her UNSC implant. A moment later the words 'Miranda Keyes Cmdr.' appeared next to her.

For a moment the Chief froze, then one word flooded his mind; 'FUCK!' The Chief had blamed himself for Captain Jacob Keyes's death and since then had replayed the events at Halo over and over to see how he had let Keyes die. 'If only I hadn't let him go off to the 'weapons cache' without me. 'If only I'd have gotten to the swamp facility faster. 'If only I'd have gotten to him before that blob on the Truth and Reconciliation had absorbed him. If only. If only.'

And now his daughter was right here, fatherless because the Chief had failed. Miranda didn't know the circumstances surrounding her father's death, only that he had died in service of the earth and the UNSC. Here was a young woman, now fatherless because he wasn't fast enough. The Chief didn't know what to do or think. He wondered if Miranda would be angry at him, sad to know how her father had died, relieved to know how her father had died. The knowledge that someone you loved had been absorbed by the flood would be pretty horrific knowledge; perhaps it would be better if left unknown? The Chief had been trained to kill, not to understand the feelings of others. Perhaps a visit to the ships psych officer was in order? But no, he couldn't do that, he had to look strong for the troops, Johnson was right about that, and besides, how could any psych officer understand his feelings?

With a hard swallow the Chief kept walking. This wasn't to time for

such matters. He reached Lord Hood and saluted before turning to Miranda and saluting. He couldn't help but avert his eyes from her in shame.

Lord Hood was the first to speak; 'I apologise, but where going to have to make this quick, we need every minute we can get if we want to defeat the Covenant.'

Johnson took note of the way Lord Hood had said that, it sounded tired, subdued, not like Hood's usual voice of authority. Looking closer he could see the bags underneath Lord Hood's eyes. Though Johnson didn't know it Hood had barely slept in the last few months, so frantically had the work been to bring all of the S-MAC stations online and co-ordinate plans for Earths defence.

Hood willed himself to stay awake. He was under no illusions about the danger Earth was in and he doubted that they could ever fight back the Covenant. 'Damn' thought Hood, 'I'd rather be spending my last few days alive with my family instead of some god-forsaken S-MAC platform.'

But Lord Hood knew that now was the time for duty and not thought and so he continued.

'Sargent Avery Johnson. For acts of singular daring and devotion in service of the UNSC and the UESC you have been awarded The Colonial Cross; the highest honour possible for a member of the United Nations Military.'

Lord Hood turned to his left and removed The Colonial Cross from the grasp of a waiting ensign before pinning it onto Johnson's chest.

Lord Hood continued; 'In addition to receiving The Colonial Cross you have been promoted to the rank of Sargent Major. Do you accept your new rank?'

'SIR! YES! SIR!'

With that Lord Hood reached over and pinned the insignia of Sargent Major onto Johnson's uniform.

Upon the Chief's HUD the marker for Johnson changed from 'Avery P. Johnson Sgt.' to 'Avery P. Johnson Sgt. Maj.'

The Chief watched as an Ensign approached Lord Hood and spoke to him in a hurried whisper. The Chief watched Hood issue some orders to the Ensign who saluted Hood before leaving. Although he knew not what had been exchanged a sudden feeling of impending danger ran down his spine shaking his nerve. He swallowed hard and forced himself to maintain his composure. There was no sense worrying about it now.

Turning towards The Master Chief, Johnson and Miranda Keyes, Lord Hood excused himself before turning towards a holo-pedestal. 'Alright Cortana, go ahead.'

From within the Pedestal a hologram of Cortana roughly 60cm tall appeared. The Chief noticed with a smile that she had changed her hair since he had seen her last.

'Another whisper sir, out near Io. I have probes on route.'

Even as she spoke several of the clarion spy drones drifting inert within the asteroid belt came to life, responding to the touch of feeble radiations. Briefly minute jets of gas flared as the drones re-oriented themselves. Onboard the drone's small fusion drives powered up releasing the immense energies of the sun. With a blinding flash of blue light and over a moment of time too short to be measured the very fabric of space and time was torn apart as the drones entered the eerie realm of slipspace. Neither Cortana, nor Lord Hood, nor the Master Chief knew what they would find.

Ten million miles away, back around the Earth a chill was running up Johnson's spine. 'Are the Covenant here already?' 'Are we going to die?' 'Can we win?' These thoughts and others filled his mind, bringing uncertainty. But there was one thing that Johnson was sure of; if the Covenant were here then they were in for a hell of a fight.

As Lord Hood talked to one of his Ensign Cortana turned to face the Chief and Johnson. 'You look nice,' came her words from the speaker concealed in the pedestal.

'Thanks.' replied the Chief and Johnson simultaneously with each other. It was a reply that was followed by embarrassed looks from both parties.

Shortly thereafter Lord Hood finished speaking to the Ensign and resumed the ceremony. 'I'm sorry for the interruption, the Covenant don't know a thing about convenient timing,' grinned Lord Hood before resuming the ceremony. 'Commander Miranda Keyes. Your father; Captain Jacob Keyes's actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of military service. His bravery in the face of impossible odds reflects great credit upon himself and the UNSC. The navy has lost one of its finest.'

Stepping forward Commander Miranda Keyes accepted her father, Captain Jacob Keyes's medal in her hand. She gazed at it with saddened eyes, her memories on the time she had spent with her father. She hadn't seen him much in the past ten years; it seemed that one of them was always on a cruise, something she regretted now. Both had them had been too obsessed with fighting the Covenant to have much time for family, But if not for family then why else were they fighting this war? With sadness in her mind she saluted Lord Hood before stepping back down.

With cruel startling-ness the quiet hush of the bridge was penetrated by blaring electronic wails. All around technicians hurried to their battle stations and outside Marines clambered into their armour and readied their weapons.

Lord Hood bellowed some orders to one of his ensign's before turning towards Cortana. 'Cortana, report.'

'Covenant vessels detected by the drones Sir, closing at 4xC. Estimated time of arrivalâ€|120 seconds.'

Lord Hood thought for a moment. 'Well that's it then. I want everyone bought up to combat alert alpha.'

On the large wall screen the names of all 376 S-MAC stations and their associated reactor complexes, and every UNSC warship appeared with a red light next to them. The Chief was surprised to see that he also listed, under the 'misc' column. The Chief was also surprised when a message informing him to go to combat alert alpha appeared on his HUD. Within forty-five seconds of the order being issued the lights on the screen started turning green as the UNSC fleet began to reach combat alert alpha.

Just as the last ship reached alert alpha the Covenant fleet burst forth from slipspace. Cortana spoke up again; 'Slipspace ruptures sir. 30 light seconds away, bearing one-seven-four-niner. I'm counting 15 Covenant vessels. At that range sir they'll be able to dodge our fire easily.'

On board the bridge of The Cairo a voice came over the radio, slightly distorted by static, presumably as a result of the Covenant Electronic Counter Measures gear. 'This is Fleet Admiral Harper, we are engaging the enemy, I say again we are engaging the enemy.'

'Negative Admiral, stay in close and defend the S-MAC's.' Lord Hood looked up and out of the bridge windows. Above him he could see his orders being carried out as hundreds of frigates and what must have been thousands of C709 Longsword Interceptors darted about. With the fleet in close the Covenant would have a hard time closing to within the S-MAC's dead zones allowing the S-MAC's to engage the Covenant from their maximum range. Lord Hood prayed silently to whatever deity was out there that the advantage of range would be enough to protect the stations, the lives aboard them and the lives of the people on Earth.

'Something's not right; the fleet that destroyed Reach was 50 times the size of this one.' Lord Hood had a bad feeling, if the Covenant were attacking Earth with a fleet this small they must have had something bad in store.

On board the bridge of The Cairo one of the scanner operators called out; 'Sir, additional contacts; boarding craft and lots of 'em.'

'It looks like they're going to try and take out some S-MAC's with their boarding craft. It'll give their capitol ships a pinhole they can rush and make a straight shot at Earth. Well, we aren't going to let that happen. Cortana, instruct the fleet to engage those boarding craft, try and thin out the number of boarders out boys will have to face.'

'Gladly sir.'

Chapter 5

New Beginnings

Groggily consciousness began to seep back into the commander's mind, and with it came a splitting headache. His entire body burned and he struggled to breath. His vision was blurry and he found himself unable to focus his vision on anything. With a minor shock he realised that he was being dragged by two of the burly Jiralhanae.

Whilst he couldn't see them he could smell their rank breath, caused by the carrion on which they feasted, and the fibres of their coats lodged in his nose.

The voices of the two Jiralhanae began to penetrate the mist, seemingly muted at first, but growing stronger by the word.

'How much further must we heft this baggage? Any cell will do.'

'Why not throw him in with this lot, they could use the meat.'

The commander managed to turn his head in time to see who they were talking about Kig-Yar prisoners. Their razor sharp claws lashed through the air, stopping what seemed but a few units from the commander's face. He winched in fear, bringing a suppressed chuckle from one of the Jiralhanae.

The first Brute spoke up again; 'Them? What about us? My belly aches and his flesh is seared just the way I like it.'

Another Brute, angry, spoke up; 'You two whimper like Grunts fresh off the teat.'

The commander was waking up now and he recognised that the angry Jiralhanae was Tartarus.

'Besides,' Tartarus continued 'this one's not meant for the jails; the Prophets have something special in mind.' Tartarus began to chuckle, filling the thick air of the Jails with his voice and sending convulsions down the Commander spine.

The Commander was thrown into a grav-lift and began to soar upwards. His mind was working faster now, but he still was unsure of where they were going, but he suspected it was probably the Gallows. Eventually the grav-lift slowed to a halt and the Commander was dragged out once more, this time onto the windswept expanse one of High Charity's massive sky-bridges.

The red clad Sangheili Honour Guard, The honour guard, watched as the two Jiralhanae dragged the shamed Sangheili Commander along the sky-bridge. He tightened his grip on his staff and his eyes warily narrowed on the Jiralhanae Chieftain. The Jiralhanae were entering a sacred Sangheili area and as usual they showed nothing but arrogance and contempt. The honour guard sighed as he thought to himself; 'Do these Jiralhanae swine know nothing of the Arbiters and all they have done for the Covenant? How they kept us together in our darkest hours?' The honour guard shook his head; he'd seen how the Jiralhanae behaved, they were the newest member of the Covenant and yet they swaggered around like they'd invented the concept. He'd discussed it covertly with his Sangheili brothers and they all agreed. Things were tense, and he, like many others could smell a looming conflict.

The Jiralhanae reached the end of the sky-bridge and walked through the doors that popped open, dragging the commander with them. They threw him to the ground, ordering him to bow before doing the same themselves.

Tartarus began to speak once more; 'Noble Prophets of Truth and Mercy, I have brought forth the incompetent.'

'You may leave us Tartarus, and take your Brutes with you.'

'Butâ€œ|but I thoughtâ€œ|' The Commander could hear the anger in Tartarus' voice as he growled to his Jiralhanae. He muttered under his breath as he left, but made no attempt at concealing his distaste from the Prophets. The insolence thought the Commander was incredible.

The Commander raised his head slightly and looked forward through the tops of his eyes. In front of him he could see the ornately detailed bottoms of two anti-gravity thrones, anti-gravity thrones belonging to the High Prophets of Truth and Mercy.

He quickly lowered his eyes again; he was no Brute; he would not show insolence in front of the revered Prophets. But he still had no idea as to why the Prophets had had him brought here.

The Prophet of Truth began to speak; 'Tell me, do you know where we are?'

The Elite commander raised his head slightly and allowed his eyes to take in the room. It was large; more a small hall than a large room and it was lit with the diffuse purple glow common to all covenant architecture. Suddenly recognition flooded his mind and he lowered his head in shame.

'Well?' inquired the Prophet of Truth, 'Do you?'

The Commander sighed before answering, voice filled with shame. 'Yes, The Mausoleum of the Arbiter.'

The Prophet of Truth swept his arm gently, gesturing to the Mausoleum walls. The walls of the chamber were covered in small vaults, each marked with a flashing 'T' light. From a large circular hole in the middle of the room a white glow flooded, illuminating the walls of the Mausoleum.

Truth continued once more; 'Here rests the vanguard of the Great Journey, every Arbiter from first to last, each created and consumed in times of crisis.'

The harsh voice of Mercy quipped in; 'The taming of the Hunters, the Grunt rebellion, were it not for the Arbiters the Covenant would have broken long ago.'

'Even on my knees I do not belong in their presence,' replied the Commander.

'Indeed,' replied Truth. '...The council decided to have you hung by your entrails and your corpse paraded around the city. But ultimately the terms of your execution are up to me.'

'I am already dead,' the Commander retorted.

Truth paused for a moment, the soft disseminate glow of the Mausoleum casting deep shadows upon his long slenderly frame. 'The council wasâ€œ|overzealous. We know you are no Heretic.'

'This, This is the true face of Heresy.'

A hologram appeared from the projector within Truth's anti-grav throne. An Elite stood within the centre of a large sized room lit by an orange glow; the Commander could tell the architecture was obviously Forerunner. But the Elite in the hologram was no ordinary Elite. Instead of his usual translucent armour-a holy construct of the Forerunners, he wore armour that had obviously been jury rigged from whatever had been available. As well as that instead of the usual shining blues, reds and gold's of Sangheili armour the armour was clad in the greens, greys and browns of disruptive pattern camouflage, much like the humans used. And, as further insult he was equipped not with a sacred plasma weapon but with one of the human's primitive projectile weapons.

The camouflage clad Sangheili in the hologram began to speak, quiet at first, but getting louder and faster as he went.

'Fellow Sangheili. For nine ages we have followed the Prophets in their promise of the Great Journey. We have fought against their enemies, most recently the Humans and many of us have died. But brothers of the Covenant, I tell you now, It is not the humans who are our enemies, IT IS THE PROPHETS. With the destruction of the Installation 04 we discovered the truth. My brothers, hear this; THE GREAT JOURNEY IS A FRAUD!'

The hologram froze, leaving the revelations of this Heretic to hang heavy in the air.

Once more the Commander began to talk. 'But what can I do? I can no longer command ships, lead troops into battle.'

Truth replied; 'Not as you are, but become the Arbiterâ€|and you will be set lose against this Heresy with our blessing.'

'What of the council?'

This time it was Mercy who spoke up, his sermonising voice filling the air. 'The tasks you will undertake as the Arbiter are perilous, suicidal. You will die, like those before you. The council will have its corpse.'

The Commander stood and began and stepped forward unsteadily. He approached the shaft of white light and as he did the gleaming armour of the Arbiter rose up.

He gingerly reached forward, and skittered his hands over the chest piece. His hands closed around the helmet and he lifted it reverently. It was fine armour, blessed by the Forerunner and blessed by the Prophets.

He carefully lowered the helmet onto his head and a smile filled his face. He was now The Arbiter, the most holy and revered warrior of all the Covenant, and he knew that he would reclaim his honour.

He turned toward the two Prophets and inhaled; 'What would you have your Arbiter do?'

Chapter 6

I like Fireworks

Aboard the four-hundred and twenty-six C709 Longsword class Interceptors within the gamma sector of Earth space Lord Hood's orders to destroy the boarders appeared. On one of those Longsword's Captain Rolf Arles was grinning. 'Finally' he thought 'it's time to make those Covenant bastards pay.' Rolf turned to his Weapons System Officer or Whizzo; Warrant Officer Adrian Martins. 'Ready weapons and targeting systems. I full power to engines. Begin electronic warfare protocols.' With a nod Martins began to work the forest of dials and knobs that comprised his station. Aboard 425 other Longsword's the same exchange was taking place. One thing was certain; the defenders were ready.

Arles flicked a switch bringing the 'sword off autopilot and deploying his side stick controller. He tentatively stretched his hand before placing it over the stick and flicking the Longsword over with a short tug. With his other hand he slammed the throttle through the gate and engaged full afterburner. Along with the 425 other Longsword's Arles accelerated towards the Covenant boarders at over 60g's, but thanks to the crafts inertial dampeners Arles felt none of these.

Whilst Arles was flying the 'sword towards the formation his Whizzo Martins was readying the craft for combat. Flicking switches he sped the barrels of the 50mm MLA's up to speed and commanded the ammo to feed down into the breach. Within another 30s he had ran through the combat checklist and found everything to be in order. The next moment he looked to his ESM screen. The boarding craft where emitting heavy noise jamming; primitive stuff, easy to crack. The Longsword's powerful ECCM systems began scanning the jamming the Covenant where using and within a few minutes the jamming AI had identified the control algorithms and filtered them out.

'Now it's my turn for some fun,' Arles muttered to himself. Carefully his hands flew over the control panels, flicking switches, adjusting toggles. Within moments he had siphoned off some power from the reactors and fed it into the Longsword's own jamming array. Although the 'swords jammers weren't particularly powerful; a mere 20kW at max output, vs. a *_seraph's_* 80kW it didn't matter all that much; when it came to jamming it wasn't just power that mattered; it was the quality the mattered, and throughout this war humanity's jamming had been of far superior quality. But whatever the output the effect of 426 Longsword's, each blasting out 20kW of sophisticated deception jamming across the ether towards the Covenant boarders was dramatic. Within moments of the jamming commencing the Covenant BattleNets were in disarray, their radar screens were blanked out and their communications were jammed. The boarders were now blind and cut-off; easy pickings for the horde of Longsword's bearing down upon them at over 40km/s.

With the Covenant electronics in disarray Martins turned his attention to the radar. The entire screen was filled with radar returns from the inbound Covenant boarding craft. Fear dawned upon Martins; they were still being jammed, this time by sophisticated deception jamming; the kind that blanked out radar displays. But then the Martins realised the even scarier truth; the radar wasn't clogged from jamming; those signals were real.

Martins yelled into his helmet mike; 'FUCK!'

Surprised Arles began to reply; 'What? What the fuck are you talking about? Martins? Don't screw with me Martins. WHAT THE HELL IS IT!'

'You know those boarding craft where on our way to blow up?'

'Yeah?'

'WELL THERE'S OVER 4500 OF THEM!'

'FUCK!'

Aboard the 425 other Longsword's the same sobering exchange was taking place. The pilots of the 'swords knew they had to make this count, else it'd be the boys on the stations who paid. It may have been a turkey shoot, but there were one hell of a lot of turkey's to kill and not a lot of time to do it in.

'Ok Martins get on the horn, we've got to maximise Time Over Target, we can't afford for anyone to attack the same target twice. You hear me?

'I hear you.'

Martins brought up his Tactical Information Display System TIDS and began co-ordinating the strike with the other 425 Longsword's. Within moments he had received the region that his 'sword was to target and marked it out for Arles on the HUD.

Today however the UNSC did have one thing going for it; the Covenant boarding craft were foolishly flying in a tight grouped formation that made them even easier pickings. Furthermore the formation was so tight that even if a 'sword missed its target the rounds would most likely hit another craft behind it. But the pilots of the Longsword's knew they had to act fast; the Covenant boarders wouldn't be staying grouped forever and pretty soon they'd be splitting up to go after their assigned stations. Once that happened it'd be a lot harder to kill them all.

15 seconds out and Arles fingered the trigger for the massive 50mm MLA's and carefully adjusted his heading. They needed to make the first pass count if they wanted a chance at stopping enough boarders.

15â€|14â€|13â€|12â€|11â€|â€|

10 seconds out and all 426 opened fire. From each 'sword hundreds of Depleted Uranium shells spewed forth at incredible speeds before tearing into the ranks of Covenant boarding craft. The thinly armoured hulls of the Boarding craft were no match of the sheer weight of the high velocity projectiles and as each round penetrated it spayed lethal monomolecular edged shrapnel in all directions, shredding those in its path. Milliseconds later the shrapnel was followed by a wave of Depleted Uranium vapour, superheated to phosphorescent temperatures by the sheer force of impact. The wave of DU vapour collided with the boarders vaporising many outright and turning the remainder into a horribly blackened and charred mess. As the atmospheres rushed out of the now de-pressureised boarding craft the hideous soup of blood and other bodily fluids that had once been

the boarders was sucked into space, where it began to boil profusely. Seconds later the containment of hundreds of plasma reactors failed and shimmering balls of blue plasma blossomed, turning everything around them into free floating molecules. As boarding craft which had not been hit in the initial volley of fire tried frantically to pull up, many crashed into other boarding craft or flew into the exploding reactors adding still more carnage to formation.

Death now filled the sky.

But for the crew of the Longsword's this was death to be celebrated, not mourned and Arles whooped in elation as he blew through the wreckage of a boarding craft, turning a Grunt that had somehow been left intact into purple goo on his windscreen.

Arles knew they had slaughtered them, surely there mustn't be many left now, it would just be a matter of mopping up and for now the Earth would be safe. Swinging around for another attack run Arles shouted to Martins; 'Report!'

'Jesus, There's still nearly 4000 of the Fucking Assholes left!'

'WHAT! How can there still be that many? Your instruments must be wrong.'

'I'm telling you, the instruments aren't lying, there are still 3286 left.'

'Fuck.'

Adrenalin surging through his veins Arles dropped his 'sword' in behind the formation and started spraying it on full auto. He would show them, they couldn't have Earth, and he'd kill them or die trying. Arles creamed into his mike; 'DIE ARSEHOLES DIE!'

'Arles! Short Bursts for Crying Out Loud! Arles!

Martins looked on in horror as Arles began to swing the nose of his Longsword, still spraying cannon fire towards another 'sword.'

'ARLES! What the hell are you doing? ARLES!'

With only milliseconds to spare Martins flipped the master override for the Longsword's weapons, silencing the MLA's before leaning over the central control panel and calmly slapping Arles in the face.

'ARLES, SNAP OUT OF IT! We're here to kill Covenant, not humans! What the hell did you think you were doing?'

Martins watched as a look of horror formed upon Arles's face. Arles slumped down on the controls and began to whimper. 'Oh man, oh man, we're done for. Don't you get it man? We can't stop them; we're fucking done for man. There are too fucking many. We're done for; we're done-didily-done for man. We're going to die man, we gotta get the hell out of here man. How did I get into this man, oh god, we're done for. Do you hear me Martins? WE'RE DONE FOR!'

'ARLES, SNAP OUT OF IT! Now you are going to put your hands back on those controls and fly this Longsword properly OR I'LL KICK YOUR ARSE MYSELF. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME? '

'But, butâ€¦'

'NO BACKCHAT, FLY THIS FUCKING SPACESHIP NOW! '

Slowly Arles reached forward and placed his hands back on his HOTAS tears streaming from his eyes. 'Iâ€¦Iâ€¦I'm sorry.'

'It's not your fault Arles, we've all had moments like that, but we haven't got time right now; the formation is starting to break up; go after their stations. We gotta kill as many now as we can, or it'll be the stations that pay. And if that happensâ€¦Earthâ€¦willâ€¦die.'

Carefully, and slowly at first Arles began to edge the throttle back up, regaining his confidence by the second. Diving on another boarding craft he quickly despatched it with a burst of cannon-fire, and death washed coolly over his face. Another kill later and his confidence had been regained, and with the lightest of feather touches he delicately skipped the Longsword about the void, eviscerating the boarding craft with sharp, precise bursts.

Suddenly Arles and Martins found themselves alone in the sky.

'Martins, report!'

'Damn, the formation just broke up; they're going after their targets.'

'Shit! Find me some targets then, this is our last chance.'

Martins turned his attention to his radar again and quickly spotted a 'small' group of around 200 boarding craft headed towards an S-MAC battle cluster comprising The Cairo, The Athens and The Malta. Marking it on the HUD he prayed they'd take out enough for the CIWS on each station to deal with the rest.

Arles slammed the throttle through the gate once more and pulled in behind the formation. Twelve more boarding craft quickly fell to his MLA's and the 13th fell when Martins spoke up again; 'Better make it quick; we're approaching the free-fire zones for the battle-cluster's CIWS. When we reach that point we'll have to break it off.'

Two more boarding craft fell and Arles was getting into position behind a 3rd when Martins informed him they were 20km from the free-fire zone.

'Better break it off.'

'Don't worry; I can get this guy before then.'

Arles depressed the trigger once more but this boarding craft had a particularly skilled pilot and it skipped over the line of tracers.

'Damn!'

'5 clicks out.'

'Don't worry, I'll get him.'

Arles depressed the trigger for a second time and again the boarding craft managed to skip over the tracers.

'Crafty little bugger isn't he?'

'2 clicks out, Arles break it off.'

'Don't worry, I've got him.'

'Arles disengage! Shit! ONE CLICK OUT! DISENGAGE!'

'ARLES! HALF-A-CLICK OUT! DISENGAGE!'

For the third time Arles depressed his finger. This time there would be no escape for the boarding craft and the line of tracers tore into the boarding craft shredding the interior and sending fragments tumbling in all directions.

'ARLES!'

Arles slammed the throttle into full reverse and the Longsword violently shook from the force of the deceleration. The Longsword slid at last to a halt.

'Range to free fire-zone?'

'Oh-point-Zero-One Clicks. That's some good flying Arles.'

'How many still left for this cluster?'

'One-Hundred and Seventy-Eight.'

'How many other clusters are still facing boarding?'

'12.'

'I should have done better.'

Martins paused for a moment; he could see that Arles was still shaken by what had happened out there. The same thing had happened to him when he had first gone into combat and he knew that he couldn't let Arles dwell on what went wrong. 'Look, Arles, you can't think that way. You did fine out there and I'm proud of you. Don't forget that you killed over 30 boarding craft. That's about 450 less Covenant troops those stations will have to face. There's no point on beating yourself up over it, if you do that then the Covenant don't need to destroy you; you'll have already destroyed yourself.'

Arles took a deep breath. He was knew that he could have done better, killed more boarding craft, saved more lives. Martins was wrong; he hadn't done well; he'd sucked balls, he was FUBAR. And now, because of that it would be the people on the stations who paid.

Tentatively he placed his hands back on the controls and re-activated the auto-pilot. He had a patrol route to get back too and next time,

if those Covenant bastards wanted to get past, they'd have to kill him first.

Or, He'd Die Trying

Chapter 7

Although the Longsword's had inflicted a terrible toll upon them the boarders had not given up. Rather than turning and fleeing, back to the safety of the Capitol ships that had launched them they had pressed on, all the while taking huge casualties. But they had had the advantage of numbers and they had used it to the fullest. For every one boarding craft that a 'sword had destroyed another had two slipped through. Then finally the Longsword's had broken off, and the boarders had breathed sighs of relief. They had been safe. Or so they had thought.

Aboard the fifteen-hundred surviving boarding craft their had been collective sighs of relief, and although they had taken heavy losses there was still enough craft for them to attack 37 of the Human space-stations with nearly 50 boarding craft apiece. In the cargo holds the boarders had anxiously waited, powered up their weapons and activated their shields. They had thought about the glory this day would bring them. Aboard each boarding craft the Elite in charge had stood up and begun to lead his fellow Covenant in the Writ of Union. Few of them ever got a chance to finish it.

Even as the Elite's had spoke hull panels had retracted aboard the S-MAC platforms, revealing scores of 110mm MLA chain guns. Guided by each stations tireless AI the turrets had pointed skyward and taken aim at the boarders. Moment's later electricity had surged into the breaches, igniting kilograms of propellant with an almighty whoosh.

From each platform 110mm High Explosive streams of light had lanced forth, sliced into the formations with surgical precision and utterly devastated those boarding craft unlucky enough to get in the way. As the 110mm rounds collided with them at hypersonic velocities they had simply ceased to exist and the numbers of remaining boarders had rapidly dwindled.

But even as the forty-or-so boarding craft inbound on each of Gamma Sectors S-MAC platforms had been smashed-to-pieces by the CIWS batteries they had kept coming. Desperately the AI's on the S-MAC's tried to destroy the last of the boarders, but they where running out of time and room; with each microsecond the boarders drew closer to the dead-zone of the S-MAC's point defence systems. If the boarding craft reached that point; 1800 metres out, then there would have been nothing to stop them from docking and unleashing their deadly cargoes.

For The Tripoli, The Alexandria, The Valletta, The Tel Aviv and 15 other stations luck was on their side and the mighty 110mm cannons fell silent with the destruction of the boarding craft and to the cheers of their crews. However aboard 17 other stations lady luck's smile had not shone and the guns fell silent not to the cheers of Marines, but to the cocking of weapons and the blaring of klaxons. At those 17 stations the nearly ten boarding craft had reached the dead zone of the 110mm cannons and were now only moments from docking.

Aboard the bridge of one of those 17 stations; *The Cairo*, a figure in Green Armour had watched all this unfold, both on the tactical displays of the bridge, and with his own adaptive optics zoomed off into space. As the boarders had prepared to dock he had turned to an old man, and was ordered by him to defend the station. He had walked off the bridge and into one of the security stations where he had calmly taken a BR-55 from a wall rack, inserted a magazine into the receiver and cocked the handle before lifting it to his shoulder.

He was ready.

He was prepared.

He was The Master Chief.

Chapter 8

Lieutenant Lance Armstrong ducked back behind the portable barricade a spilt second before a hail of plasma fire impacted where his head had been moments before. Molten metal dripped down onto his helmet, filling the air with the stink of ozone. Second's later plasma began to impact upon the barricade and after a few moments the barrier began to glow dull cherry red as the plasma burnt through it.

'Fuck,' thought Armstrong. 'How did I get into this mess?' Armstrong glanced to the side and saw his buddy 'Chuck trying to return fire on the Covenant, but he was pinned down by a grunt manning a turret. Armstrong flipped his COM channel open; 'Stay down damnit! They've got us pinned!'

Armstrong heard his COM click as 'Chuck replied; 'If they keep us pinned down they'll be able to flank us; then were screwed!'

'I know! I knowâ€|'

As a crystalline needle pierced the wall behind him Armstrong began to run over the situation once more, try and think about how they had gotten into this mess, try and think about how to get out. When the klaxons had first gone off Armstrong and his squad had just been coming off the range after firing practice, so they where already in their gear and ready for action. They'd sprinted to their action station; Hangar A-02 and started setting up a defensive position. If *The Cairo* needed reinforcements during the battle ahead they'd probably come through this bay, so it was imperative that he and his Marines hold it. Armstrong had his squad take up position behind portable barricades, and position their weapons to cover the hangar's three main entrances with interlocking fields of fire; any assault coming them would be suicide.

But in the end the Covenant assault hadn't come through any of the three entrances; it had came from a completely unexpected direction. One of the boarding craft had nudged right up to the hangar bay doors, extended its boarding tube and began cutting through the thick bullet-proof glass with its plasma torches. That was risky; although cutting through the glass was quicker than cutting through the armoured hull it risked shattering the glass. If that happened both the boarding craft, and the hangar bay would explosively de-compress; that was a bad thing.

But today at least, luck had held and the glass remained intact. Armstrong and his Marines had struggled to re-position themselves, cover the entrance point but they were too slow. Before they could get around, an Elite leaned out and a plasma grenade arced from its hand, landing in the middle of the squad's position.

'HIT THE DIRT!'

Time had seemed to slow as he and his squad ducked behind cover. After what seemed like an eternity to Armstrong the grenade detonated. The ear shattering blast echoed through the Hanger as iridescent tendrils of blue plasma arced about and vaporised anything in their path. The blast subsided and time seemed to return to its normal speed once more. Armstrong looked around frantically, counting his squad. Amazingly all had managed to survive the blast.

But in the brief moment of distraction five Elites had charged from the boarding craft, with dual plasma rifles and dual needlers blazing. A moment later two of his squad were mown down by a hail of plasma and a third disappeared in a pink explosion.

'FALL BACK! Everyone fall back!'

'Rubato, smoke!'

'Despoja! You cover us!'

Despoja, one of the squads 2 SAW gunners dropped to her knee and opened up on full auto with her M247 SAW. 7.62x51mm Full Metal Jacket rounds tore into the lead Elite. The Elite's shields flared for a moment before collapsing under the torrent of lead and the next rounds tore into its chest releasing a scream of agony and a spray of purple blood.

As Despoja had switched targets Rubato had charged up behind and fired a smoke grenade from the 40mm Grenade Launcher under his Battle Rifle. There was a dull thud as the round landed around the Elites and a second later they were engulfed in a thick, billowing cloud of smoke. Plasma sprayed from the cloud in all directions, in the hope that it would hit someone and a plasma grenade arced from within the cloud, landing next to Despoja and Rubato. Before either of them could move it exploded, vaporising Rubato outright and catapulting Despoja's mangled corpse into the air.

But Despoja and Rubato's deaths hadn't been entirely in vain. In the time that Despoja's SAW and Rubato's smoke had brought the three remaining squad members; Armstrong, 'Chuck and McKenzie had managed to retreat back towards their fallback position.

End
file.